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ABSTRACT

There are three basic types of career indecision: (1) developmental; (2) acute situational-reaction; and (3) chronic indecision. Developmental indecision is usually alleviated by maturity as well as by self-awareness activities and career information. Acute situational-reaction indecision is relieved by the removal of situational or environmental barriers. The chronically indecisive individual is different, needing special attention and treatment. This person is paralyzed and anxious, exhibiting psychological/behavioral dysfunction and needing long-term counseling to effect personality restructuring. Characteristics of chronically indecisive persons include procrastination, manipulation, helplessness, and external locus of control. Many college personnel have the opportunity to help students with decision making but are unsure of themselves in the counseling role. If simple definitive guidelines are given to faculty, staff, and administrators to help them identify chronically indecisive students, the students can be referred to sources of appropriate help and guided through this critical state. (ABL)

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Introduction

Decision-making is commonplace and inescapable. It is impossible to have it all, do everything, or be in more than one place at once. Moreover, although over 20,000 occupations are described in the latest edition of the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (U.S. Department of Labor, 1977), it is unrealistic, if not impossible, to hope to find the perfect career "match" for a lifetime.

When a decision is made, there are no guarantees about outcomes. Armed with only self-assessment estimates and incomplete information, "we confront an unknowable future in a world where perfect matches and decisions do not exist" (Kinnear & Krumboltz, 1984, p. 324).

Some people develop effective decision-making skills seemingly just by living; others agonize and procrastinate when faced with even minor decisions. Some people are not aware of the many choices they could make; some feel better letting others make their choices for them (Scholz, Prince, and Miller, 1975).

In career selection, many college students decide easily and purposefully. Others, however, have so much difficulty with career decision-making that they vacillate between plans, change college majors repeatedly and make little or no progress toward a career goal. This state of indecision becomes a problem to the college student, his/her parents and the institution.

A clear understanding of this state of indecision is needed to guide the exploration and definition of the term. For the purpose of this paper -- to define and explore this state -- a distinction between being "career undecided" and "career indecisive" will be used (Crites, 1974), indicating awareness that career indecision may take more than one form.

As cited by Zytowski, Holland and Holland (1978) describe three undecided types: 1) a group which simply doesn't have to decide yet, and so stays undecided; 2) a group which is mildly anxious, immature, or incompetent; and 3) a final group which might be described as having a disposition toward indecisiveness (Zytowski, 1978, p. 146).

Tyler and Ginzberg (cited in Crites, 1969) observe that a "deviant vocational decision pattern often reflects an 'avoidance-avoidance' conflict, stemming from a character trait of indecisiveness rather than a superficial and temporary indecision" (p. 171).

Review of the literature reveals three basic types of indecisiveness--1) simple developmental indecision; 2) acute situational indecision caused by environmental factors or barriers, and 3) chronic, paralyzing indecision associated with emotional disability or personality factors. In the balance of this paper the three types will be defined and discussed, with suggestions for strategies for dealing with each.

Developmental Indecision

In its developmental form, career indecision represents a natural, sequential process which can be aided by interest-exploration, values clarification, skill assessment, various other self-awareness activities and exposure to career information.

Holland and Holland (1977) view the state of being undecided as normal and common--desirable in many circumstances. Often a person is undecided because he/she lacks information to make a sound decision. The authors note that "a large proportion of undecided students are doing what intelligent adults do--delaying some decisions until reality arrives" (p. 412). They think that such a strategy is "not necessarily stupid, uninformed, or immature" (p.412).

A second group described by the same authors in the same work as being slightly to moderately immature, interpersonally incompetent, anxious, and alienated may be undecided about a vocational decision for any of the following reasons: 1) Work is not central to their lives; they are disinterested or averse to work; 2) They show substantial general anxiety or anxiety related to decision-making; 3) They have difficulty with risk-taking; and 4) They perceive a discrepancy between their self-concepts and others' views of them.

Salomone (1982), discussing the developmentally undecided student, cites several positive reasons for remaining undecided in college, including:

1) Bright students keep their options open because they know they have many career options.
2) Students often view the world of work with creativity and complexity.
3) People alter career decisions in response to positive reinforcement from others, especially if the "others" are numerous and significant.
4) Besides having many skills, some students have many, varied interests, or uncrystallized interests. They realize that their interests may continue to shift.
5) Students recognize their need for more job-related information.
6) Needing information about effective decision-making may cause a delay.
7) Vocational goal uncertainty and lack of information about work environments may cause hesitation.
8) Uncertainty about the economic practicality of long-considered goals may cause hesitation.

Several writers have used Erikson's (1963) "Eight Ages of Man" theory, especially his fifth age--"Identity vs. Role Confusion"--lasting from 12 to 18 years of age, to explain the indecisive person's inability to make career

decisions. In the theory the developmental tasks of this stage focus on formation of ego identity--the person one feels oneself to be--and also on a sense of continuity with one's past life and experiences. The personality and value system is crystallized, and new decisions and challenges of adulthood are faced. "The danger of this stage is role confusion....It is the inability to settle on an occupational identity which disturbs....young people" (Erikson, 1963, p. 162).

Knefelkamp and Slepitza (1976) developed what they call a cognitive developmental model of career decision-making based on schemes developed by Perry (1970), themselves an outgrowth of Erikson's life-stage developmental theory. In their view people shift from external to internal locus of control, develop and practice cognitive skills of analysis and synthesis, become increasingly able to deal with complex concepts, become more self-aware, identify alternative perspectives, assume responsibility and new roles, and become increasingly comfortable with risk-taking.

All these qualitative changes take place on a continuum ranging from dualistic thinking (right vs. wrong and heavy reliance on others), to multiplicity, to relativism, to decision, commitment, and integrating one's self and career role. In this theory, developmental career indecision occurs when a person does not proceed smoothly through the hierarchy of developmental stages but "gets

stuck" in the early dualistic stages.

Acute Situational Reaction Indecision

Fuqua and Hartman (1983) identify an intermediate stge of career indecision that they call "acute situational reaction." In this case environmental stressors (financial worries, an unsupportive mate, poor health, etc.) interfere with effective decision-making. If alleviation of the effects of the stressors through improved problem-solving skills or elimination of the stressors does not result in improved decision-making, one may suspect a full-blown case of chronic indecision.

These individuals can take advantage of life crises (a mate becomes abusive, an oppressive parent dies, financial reversals make one eligible for financial aid) to set goals and establish forward momentum.

Chronic Indecision

Chronic indecision, on the other hand, represents a more serious problem often "related to underlying psychological dysfunction, requires more intensive long-term treatment, and can persist for many years" (Hartman, Fuqua, and Hartman, 1983, p. 103).

Crites (1969, p. 171) identifies three factors which contribute to a person's indecisiveness: 1) responsiveness to parental aspirations and pressures; 2) powerful fantasies about success and admiration; and persistence of childhood interests.

Tyler's earmarks of a state of vocational indecision (cited in Crites, 1969, p. 305) are the following four factors:

1) influences emanating from family and friends which cause values conflicts;

2) aspects of an occupational role may be both desirable and undesirable;

3) an individual may be suited for several occupations and find it difficult to choose among them;

4) reality may prevent implementation of a plan and there may not be alternatives.

Goodstein (1972) gives a central role to anxiety in the origin of behavioral problems in general and career decision problems in particular. He analyzes in detail the part anxiety plays in career indecision, both as an antecedent and a consequence. He, too, distinguishes between simple indecision and chronic and pervasive indecisiveness; the principle factor in simple indecision is lack of information about self and work because of limited experiences. Anxiety arises from not having chosen an appropriate vocation, and anxiety is the consequence.

In contrast, indecisiveness comes from long-standing anxiety associated with decision-making, frequently attributed to domineering, over-demanding or critical parents, according to Goodstein. For this person, often paralyzed in making any kind of decision, anxiety often

follows inability to make career decisions and becomes both an antecedent and a consequence, compounding feeling of inadequacy and frustration.

Holland and Holland (1977) state, "The indecisive disposition is seen as the outcome of a life history in which a person has failed to acquire the necessary cultural involvement, self-confidence, tolerance for ambiguity, sense of identity, self- and environmental knowledge to cope with vocational decision-making as well as other common problems. Such people....suffer from a complex cluster of maladaptive attitudes and coping behaviors" (p. 413).

The clinical findings of Hartman, Fuqua, and Hartman (1983) suggest that chronically indecisive people suffer from characterological anxiety, inadequate identity formation, and externalized control. He/she is "more likely to drop out of school, develop more serious psychological problems, or at least select a relatively unsatisfactory career due to external pressure or default decision making" (p. 104).

Like Goodstein--Hartman, Fuqua, and Blum (1985) argue that chronic career indecisive types have their etiologies in anxiety. It would be a mistake to oversimplify the difference between the types since the symptoms are ambiguous, impure, and overlap; still, they think that inferences can be drawn for the definition and identification of the chronic type.

From a definitive and diagnostic point of view, identity confusion, an externalized locus of control, and trait anxiety (a tendency to perceive situations as threatening) are associated with a more chronic form of career indecision

Barak, Carney, and Archibald (cited in Osipow, 1983) in a 1975 study, examined the role of information-seeking in reducing career indecision. In one of the few studies examining this variable specifically, the researchers compared college students enrolled in two different kinds of career-oriented workshops. A complex relationship was found between vocational information-seeking behavior and decidedness. The study does not lend support to the belief that the more occupational information sought by an undecided person, the more decided the person will become. It therefore suggests the relatively unpopular notion that information is not a panacea for a career-indecisive individual, and seems to mesh with the description of the chronically indecisive person.

Chronic career indecision is best characterized by underlying psychological dysfunction, according to Fuqua and Hartman (1982), and is much more complex than traditional treatment models have suggested. The formal indicators that help to identify the chronically indecisive person are:

1) They suffer from serious identity or self-perceptual problems;

2) They show higher levels of situational and characteristic anxiety;

3) They tend to attribute their problems to external forces.

Of these characteristics, the presence of higher levels of anxiety may be the single best cue in the identification of the chronically indecisive person.

Fuqua and Hartman concede that, beyond these few cues, there isn't any satisfactory way to identify chronicity in career indecision and that further research is needed in this area. They see three general approaches to dealing with the problem of identifying the chronically undecided person. The first involves a continuing search for specific factors that may be associated with long-term career indecision, for example--high levels of anxiety.

Another approach would be to try to identify personality-profile distinctions of chronically undecided people. Finally, systematic development and validation of clinical assessment procedures would call attention to the problem and alert new professionals during training to the special needs of these individuals. The challenge in this process lies in effectively identifying the chronically undecided early enough so that treatment may begin before the person reaches midlife.

Still another approach to defining chronically indecisive people is offered by Donald and Carlisle (1983), who define ineffective decision-makers as those who think there is one right decision and that decisions are totally right or wrong as in the dualistic stages of the Perry scheme. Often the real issue underlying the decision-maker's dilemma is one or more of the following--lack of timing, autonomy, responsibility, comfort with risk-taking, self-confidence, flexibility, information about self or environment, and too concerned with making a decision that makes everyone happy.

Turner (1979) names three identifiable characteristics which can help to define the career-indecisive individual:

1) preoccupation with another concern which interferes with his/her ability to communicate career-related concerns;
2) absence of a personal value system because of lack of experience in doing and choosing;
3) lack of application of his/her value system to the work world because of failure to realize that self-knowledge is relevant to occupational selection.

Although usually indecisive people have had enough opportunity to acquire self- and environmental information, having to make a vocational decision causes them so much anxiety that they become immobilized and cannot decide.

These people probably will not be helped by short-term vocational treatments (Holland and Holland, 1977).

Salomone (1982) carefully distinguishes between decided-undecided and decisive-indecisive behavior, believing that undecided and indecisive are adjectives that should be assigned to different people. He states, "While it is possible to be both decided and decisive, it is also possible to be undecided and, yet, of a decisive nature" (p. 498). In this view vocational decision-indecision is a concept made up of two subconcepts and their attendant behaviors, thus:

Decidedness.....Undecidedness

decided-undecided (behavior)

Decisiveness.....Indecisiveness

decisive-indecisive (behavior)

These subconcepts allow for definition with two separate continua. One (decided-undecided) is largely a developmental rational-cognitive issue, while the second (decisive-indecisive) is an emotional-psychological issue.

Salomone strongly believes that defining or labeling young adults under age 25 as indecisive is wrong. Because different youth develop vocationally in vastly different ways and at different rates, young people should be allowed to stumble a little without being forced to confront an indecisive designation. He thinks identifying indecisive individuals should be limited to adult populations (p.498).

The following characteristics are those of the chronically indecisive person, according to Solomone (pp. 498-499):

1) Cannot or will not make a decision, even after a long, step-by-step, decision-making series of interviews;

2) Much repetition of the problem (almost wallowing in it) and many digressions to tangential issues;

3) High levels of ambivalence, resentment, and frustration concerning their personal-vocational situation;

4) Wants someone with a different perspective to provide answers, but will demean or ignore such answers;

5) Is very dependent upon another person (parent or parent-type) for a clear sense of identity. Apparently, does not have a clear sense of separate identity;

6) Is very dependent emotionally and financially and probably wants to remain dependent but sees the future reality of independent existence and is frightened by it;

7) Is very manipulative; has a tendency to whine; is immature on many dimensions;

8) Motivation to change behavior patterns is not very strong;

9) Not much self-confidence or self-esteem;

10) Tends to have an external locus of control--life controls this person;

11) Tendency to blame others for current dissatisfactory situation;

12) Has probably learned to be helpless and received much nurturance because of helpless-type behaviors.

Discussion and Conclusion

These are the basic types of career-indecisive people: 1) developmentally indecisive; 2) acute situational-reaction indecisive; and 3) chronically indecisive. Developmental indecision is usually alleviated by maturity, as well as by self-awareness activities and career information. Acute situational-reaction indecision is relieved by the removal of situational or environmental barriers. When the obstacles are removed or resolved the person affected can profit from the same self-assessment activities and career information as the developmentally indecisive person.

The chronically indecisive individual is different, needing special attention and treatment. This person is paralyzed, anxious, exhibiting psychological/behavioral dysfunction and needing long-term personal/emotional counseling to effect personality restructuring or change.

The necessary and sufficient characteristics which constitute identifiable symptoms of the chronically indecisive type appear to be anxiety, procrastination,

dependency, manipulation, lack of confidence, helplessness, and external locus of control, according to the expert behavioral scientists who deal with career indecision.

Many college personnel who talk with students have opportunities to disuss career decision-making. Most try to help students, but many are unsure of themselves in the counseling role. If simple definitive guidelines can be given to faculty, staff and administrators to help them identify chronically indecisive students, they can refer the students to sources of appropriate help to guide them through this critical state.

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